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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 002873

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM CO

SUBJECT: TWO MEMBERS OF THE AFRO-COLOMBIAN CAUCUS ARRESTED  
FOR PARAMILITARY TIES

REF: A. BOGOTA 02833

1B. BOGOTA 01861

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Brian A. Nichols  
Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

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11. (C) On August 30, three members of the House of Representatives were arrested for paramilitary ties. Two of them, Edgar Eulises Torres and Odin Sanchez, were prominent members of the Afro-Colombian Caucus. This brings the total number of legislators that have been arrested for parapolitical investigations to 34. The arrests of Torres and Sanchez leaves the once-promising Afro-Colombian Caucus with only six members free of any charges. The Afro-Colombian Caucus Executive Secretary Cesar Garcia told us Torres' and Sanchez' replacements have "strong ties" to the Caucus, and will continue to work on the group's priority issues. The arrests will have little effect on the Caucus' narrow legislative agenda, which remains bottled up behind other legislation or awaiting GOC input. Still, the arrests further undermine the credibility of the Caucus which already has lukewarm support from grassroots Afro-Colombian organizations. Moreover, recently implemented political reforms may delay the process of filling the two seats. End summary.

NUMBER OF LEGISLATORS ARRESTED FOR PARAMILITARY TIES GROWS

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12. (U) The Supreme Court ordered the arrests of two prominent members of the Afro-Colombian Caucus House of Representatives Edgar Eulises Torres (Cambio Radical/Partido de la U, Choco) and Odin Sanchez (Partido de la U, Choco) for alleged ties to former paramilitaries on August 30. (Torres switched parties earlier this week to the Partido de la U, in order to vote for the referendum on whether President Uribe could seek a third term (ref A).) A third representative, Juan Pablo Sanchez Morales (Caldas, Liberal Party), 27 years old and the youngest Representative of the House, was also arrested for the same charge. Since 2006, 34 legislators have been arrested, 37 legislators have resigned, and 87 have been implicated in the parapolitical scandal. Colombian legislators are chosen from a national circumscription by party rather than geographic districts. Nevertheless, legislators draw strength from their home regions and take pains to cultivate voters there. The caucus is particularly vulnerable to paramilitary ties, as its members largely come

from coastal regions that have both a large percentage of Afro-Colombian voters and suffered from a major AUC presence.

**¶13.** (U) The Supreme Court initiated investigations against the two Afro-Colombian Representatives, Torres and Sanchez, in April following testimony from former United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) leader Freddy Rendon Herrera, alias "El Aleman". Rendon Herrera told a Justice and Peace judge that Torres and Sanchez made a pact with the former Elmer Cardenas bloc of the former AUC in 2002 to receive money in exchange for their political support. The Court is also investigating Torres and Sanchez for alleged ties to the ELN following the testimony of the demobilized former chief for the ELN in Choco, Luis Omar Garcia, who reported the ELN paid people to vote for them.

**¶14.** (U) The third representative arrested, Sanchez Morales, was implicated by the testimony of former chief of the former paramilitary Central Bolivar bloc, Ivan Roberto Duque, alias "Ernesto Baez". According to Duque, Sanchez Morales was on the Liberal Party's candidate list because of a pact drafted by Duque and Dixon Ferney Tapasco, leader of the Liberal Party in Caldas.

#### AFRO-COLOMBIAN CAUCUS LOSING MEMBERS AND CREDIBILITY

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**¶15.** (SBU) Including Torres and Sanchez there have now been three Afro-Colombian Caucus members arrested for paramilitary ties in the last five months and two others investigated for corruption charges. Former Senator Juan Carlos Martinez was arrested for alleged ties to former paramilitaries on April

29 (ref B). Silfredo Morales, who holds one of two special seats for Afro-Colombians in the House of Representatives, is under investigation for misuse of funds and corruption from his days as Mayor of Maria la Baja, Bolivar in 2000. Congressman Julio Gallardo from San Andres was also investigated for misuse of state funds, but on August 10 was absolved of those charges. With the clearance of Gallardo, six of the ten members are presently free of charges.

**¶16.** (C) The recent arrests of its members has undermined the Afro-Colombian Caucus and dwindled its already lukewarm support from Afro-Colombian organizations (see ref B). Maura Mosquera, President of Afrolider and coordinator of the National Conference of Afrocolombian Organizations, told poloff on September 1 that she thought "the Afro-Colombian organizations should issue a statement of concern in response to the arrests." Cesar Garcia, the Executive Secretary for the Afro-Colombian Caucus, told poloff on September 2 that two other Caucus members, Maria Isabel Urrutia and Frank Legro, along with Garcia met September 1 to discuss how best to combat the negative image caused by the arrests.

#### REPLACEMENTS IDENTIFIED BUT COULD BE DELAYED

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**¶17.** (C) Garcia told poloff on September 2 that replacements for Torres and Sanchez were also Afro-Colombians with "strong" ties to the Caucus. Torres will be replaced by Efren Palacios Sernas, a former candidate for Mayor of Choco and pre-candidate for the Liberal Party in Choco. Sanchez will be replaced by Ismael Aldana Vivas, a former Representative for Choco. Garcia also said that Palacios Sernas had attended Caucus meetings with Torres prior to his arrest and Sanchez and Ismael have a "good" relationship. Still, Garcia acknowledged there may be delays in swearing in the new replacements because of provisions in the recently implemented Political Reform Law. According to Garcia, on September 2 the Clerk of the House of Representatives told Palacios they had to wait for the Court to certify the date the investigation was initiated against Torres.

#### USAID ASSISTANCE TO CAUCUS WON'T CHANGE

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**¶18.** (C) To date, USAID has contributed about \$50,000 dollars

for trips and technical assistance to the Afro-Colombian Caucus through the International Republican Institute (IRI). USAID also indirectly supports the Caucus by supporting technical assistance to the two Afro-Colombian political parties (headed by the two Caucus members Maria Urrutia and Silfredo Morales)(ref B). USAID funding for the Afro-Colombian Caucus will continue in the short-term since it is a small amount and it supports the institution not individual members.

Brownfield